BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0570 APRIL 13, 1976
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/BEIRUT

LEBANON -- THE GRIM ANNIVERSARY

ANNCR:

A GRIM ANNIVERSARY IN LEBANON -- THE FIRST CLASHES IN THAT COUNTRY'S CIVIL WAR TOOK PLACE ONE YEAR AGO TODAY (TUESDAY) IN A BEIRUT SUBURB. FROM THE LEBANESE CAPITAL, DOUGLAS ROBERTS HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE INCIDENT LASTED ONLY A FEW MINUTES ON A SUNNY APRIL MORNING IN SOUTH BEIRUT ONE YEAR AGO. BUT WHEN IT WAS OVER, SEVERAL PALESTINIANS LAY DEAD -- SHOT BY RIGHT WING CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN. THE REASONS FOR THE CLASH HAVE NEVER BEEN FULLY EXPLAINED. BUT AT THE TIME, FEW OBSERVERS THOUGHT IT WOULD TOUCH OFF THE FACTIONAL WARFARE THAT HAS RAGED HERE EVER SINCE.

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF THE LEBANESE CRISIS SAW FREQUENT CLASHES BETWEEN RIGHT WING MILITIAS AND PALESTINIAN COMMANDOS IN BEIRUT SUBURBS. A SHORT-LIVED MILITARY GOVERNMENT WAS FORMED IN AN EFFORT TO CONTAIN THE VIOLENCE. BUT BY EARLY JUNE, LEFTIST MOSLEM LEBANESE FORCES HAD JOINED THE PALESTINIANS, AND FIGHTING RAGED THROUGHOUT THIS SEASIDE CAPITAL, ONCE THE COMMERCIAL AND ENTERTAINMENT CENTER OF THE ARAB WORLD.

THE VIOLENCE SPARKED CONCERN IN OTHER ARAB CAPITALS. ARAB LEAGUE SECRETARY GENERAL MAHMOUD RIAD MADE AN ATTEMPT TO MEDIATE THE DISPUTE. BUT LEBANON'S FIRST REAL TRUCE OF NINETEEN SEVENTY-FIVE CAME ONLY AFTER NEIGHBORING SYRIA STEPPED IN.

SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER ABDUL HALIM KHADDAM MADE REPEATED TRIPS HERE RESULTING IN THE FORMATION OF A NEW GOVERNMENT DUBBED THE CABINET OF NATIONAL SALVATION. TENSION REMAINED, BUT THE COUNTRY SEEMED ON THE ROAD TO RECONCILIATION. BY AUGUST, HOWEVER, THE CEASEFIRE DISINTEGRATED IN A SERIES OF BLOODY CLASHES, AND THIS TIME FIGHTING SPREAD TO THE LEBANESE COUNTRYSIDE.

THERE WERE TO BE MANY OTHER CEASEFIRES OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, BUT NONE OF THEM HELD. IN SEPTEMBER, BEIRUT SAW THE BEGINNING OF WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE HOTEL WAR -- RIGHT AND LEFT WING FORCES BATTLING FOR CONTROL OF THE CAPITAL'S SEASIDE VACATION SPOTS. ARTILLERY DUELS RAGED IN THE MAIN COMMERCIAL CENTER, AND BEIRUT'S ONCE COLORFUL ARAB MARKETS WERE ALMOST TOTALLY DESTROYED.

SOME OBSERVERS HAVE POINTED OUT THAT ONE OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CURRENT CRISIS AND THE LEBANESE UPRISING OF NINETEEN FIFTY-EIGHT IS THE EXTENSIVE DAMAGE AND CASUALTIES. CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATES PUT THE DEATH TOLL OVER THE PAST YEAR AT WELL OVER TEN THOUSAND, WITH MANY THOUSANDS MORE INJURED. DAMAGE ESTIMATES RUN INTO MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, AND THE ECONOMY HAS BEEN AT AN ALMOST COMPLETE STANDSTILL.

ENVOYS FROM THE VATICAN AND FRANCE MADE UNSUCCESSFUL EFFORTS TO HALT THE BLOODSHED. AND ONCE AGAIN, IT WAS SYRIA THAT SPONSORED WHAT SEEMED TO BE A DURABLE TRUCE. THE GUNS FELL SILENT ON JANUARY TWENTY-SECOND. AND THREE WEEKS LATER, AFTER A TRIP TO DAMASCUS, PRESIDENT SULAYMAN FRANJIYEH ANNOUNCED A SEVENTEEN-POINT REFORM PROGRAM THAT WOULD HAVE GIVEN LEBANON'S MOSLEMS AN

EQUAL ROLE WITH CHRISTIANS IN THE NATION'S POWER STRUCTURE. OPTIMISM FOR AN END TO THE CRISIS GREW, BUT ONCE AGAIN, VIOLENCE PREVAILED. LEFTIST LEADERS BEGAN DEMANDING THE RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT FRANJIYEH AND THE ABOLITION OF LEBANON'S UNWRITTEN COVENANT THAT ESTABLISHED ADMINISTRATIVE POWER ON A SECTARIAN GROUNDS. FIGHTING RESUMED.

THE LEBANESE ARMY BROKE APART ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS. WHEN BRIGADIER GENERAL AZIZ AL-AHDAB PROCLAIMED HIMSELF ACTING MILITARY GOVERNOR OF LEBANON ON MARCH ELEVENTH, HE COULD COMMAND THE LOYALTY OF ONLY A SMALL PART OF THE ARMED FORCES. WITH FIGHTING AT A PEAK AND FEARS OF OUTSIDE INTERVENTION GROWING, A NEW TRUCE WAS ARRANGED IN EARLY APRIL. SPECIAL ENVOYS FROM THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE ARRIVED IN BEIRUT. THEN, PARLIAMENT ADOPTED A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PAVING THE WAY FOR THE ELECTION OF A NEW PRESIDENT.

AND THAT IS WHERE THE SITUATION STANDS AT PRESENT. SPORADIC FIGHTING CONTINUES, AND LEFT WING LEADERS CHARGE THAT SYRIA HAS SENT TROOPS INTO LEBANON. DESPITE THE CURRENT TRUCE AND PREDICTIONS THAT PRESIDENT FRANJIYEH WILL AGREE TO STEP DOWN, NO ONE HERE IS FORECASTING AN EARLY END TO THE CRISIS IN WHAT ONE BEIRUT NEWSPAPER SO APTLY CALLED "THIS NATION WITHOUT AUTHORITY."

JS/PBM